

“Innovation and the Application of Knowledge for More Effective Policing”

N8 Policing Research Partnership

BLACK, ASIAN AND MINORITY ETHNIC REPRESENTATION IN POLICING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON PERSPECTIVES IN WEST YORKSHIRE POLICE.

The police service in England and Wales has faced an historic struggle to reflect the communities it serves, with Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups particularly underrepresented. This report highlights some of the key findings from an exploratory study on staff and officer perspectives of BAME representation in West Yorkshire Police (WYP). It considered understandings of, and cited reasons for, diversity and inclusion in policing, perceived barriers during BAME officer careers, and evaluations of WYP’s diversification efforts. Discussion concluded with participants’ suggested points for consideration in future developments. With the aim of constructively informing future developments, the study comprised a detailed literature review and findings from six semi-structured interviews.

KEY FINDINGS

- A diverse and inclusive organisation was identified by participants as integral to effective police operation. The reasons cited for diversifying the police tended to stress operational need as well as the political or moral.
- The literature review found barriers to recruitment, retention and progression of police officers from ethnic minority backgrounds. To name a few, the barriers included negative perceptions of and experiences with police, a mismatch between the expectation and reality of a policing career, organisational discrimination and a lack of support for and confidence amongst BAME officers.
- The barriers to recruiting, retaining and progressing police officers from ethnic minority backgrounds in this study of WYP officers and staff largely echoed the conclusions of previous research. Participants acknowledged how barriers at one stage often overlap and cause issues at other points during the careers of BAME officers.
- Participants identified and credited the diversification efforts made by WYP. These included the work of the positive action team, the provision of religious facilities and minority group associations. All participants reported a visible increase of BAME representation within WYP’s workforce in recent years.
- Responses suggested that drives to improve BAME representation in the police tend to overly prioritise recruitment at the expense of efforts to retain and progress ethnic minority officers already in the force.
- Most participants opined that more needs to be done to rectify the lack of BAME representation in WYP. The consensus was that more drastic measures are needed to successfully implement the agenda and that these should prioritise retaining and progressing, rather than recruiting BAME officers.
- The idea of introducing positive discrimination received a mixed reception. Some participants deemed the measure and its side effects too controversial to implement, whilst others considered it a necessary last resort to boost BAME numbers.

Research conducted by Rebecca Fox, University of Leeds, LLM Criminal Justice and Criminal Law, April-September 2020.

INTRODUCTION

The mantra that the police are the public and the public are the police is a cornerstone of policing in England and Wales. Coined in the formation of the modern police service in 1829, their duty to represent the communities they serve has garnered considerable attention and aspiration since. Despite this, successive studies and inquiries (e.g. Scarman 1980, and Macpherson, 1999) have identified that the service has consistently struggled to achieve this representation, particularly in respect of BAME officers. More recently, there have been various national drives to amend this disproportionality including the Policing Vision (2025) and the National Police Chiefs' Council's Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Strategy (2018-2025). Statistics reflect these efforts, with an over 5% increase of BAME representation in the service in the last 20 years (Graham, 2013; Home Office, July 2020). Nevertheless, when compared to a rapidly diversifying society in England and Wales, numbers lag and work remains to be done.

MAIN FINDINGS

Understanding the need for diversity and inclusion in WYP

Participants unanimously cited the importance of diversity in policing. All stated that pursuing a representative force should rank at the top of policing priorities. Whilst literature highlights the political and moral grounds for workforce variety (Bullock et al, 2017, College of Policing, 2017), participant responses centred almost exclusively around the operational benefits of diversity. Described as aiding police practice, responses revealed that a representative police force was thought to be more positively received by, and have a better understanding of, the BAME communities they serve. A few participants felt their BAME background helped them in their job, enabling them to deal with ethnic minority citizens more appropriately than their white colleagues, a theory revealed in prior research (Bullock et al, 2017). Some responses stressed the value in this, appreciating how maintaining good relations between BAME groups and the police is often difficult because the former are conventionally wary of the latter.

Barriers to recruiting, retaining and progressing BAME police officers in WYP

Although questions exploring the barriers for BAME police officers were split between those regarding recruitment, retention and progression, responses frequently jumped between career stages, illustrating their overlapping nature as identified in previous research (van Ewijk, 2012). Barriers to recruitment could be split between internal and external influences. In the former, negative perceptions of and experiences with police were considered to hinder BAME officer recruitment. In the latter, several participants highlighted a consensus among ethnic minority communities that the police are racist. The media was believed to feed into this, perpetuating negative images of the police (Britton 2000). Responses also reported that such perceptions can deter individuals from applying to join the police, with BAME communities considering those who join as "turncoats" and "coconuts".

Although participants acknowledged that a commitment to recruiting BAME officers is necessary in diversifying a workforce, there was a consensus that the recruiting stage itself is not problematic. Rather, participants suggested that it is retaining and progressing officers from ethnic minority backgrounds which act as the greatest barrier to improving BAME representation in WYP.

Negative experiences with colleagues and professional standards were most commonly identified as barriers to the retention of BAME officers. Participants revealed that many ethnic minority officers believe that professional standards disproportionately target them, taking allegations against BAME group members excessively severely whilst undermining the seriousness of grievances made by them. Perceptions of insufficient support for those from minority groups in the organisation was also described as enhancing feelings of isolation and encouraging resignation.

Two participants acknowledged how the general underrepresentation of BAME officers inevitably reflects across the ranks, partially explaining the lack of ethnic minority officers in higher positions. This reflects research carried out by the West Yorkshire Association of Muslim Police (2020). Other participant responses cited a lack of promotion opportunities for BAME officers as a reason for the disparity across ranks and high levels of voluntary resignation among minority groups, with few support mechanisms and an absence of role models in high positions.

Identifying and evaluating BAME representation improvement efforts in WYP

Most of the efforts made by WYP that participants identified were practical and often related to religious practices like the provision of prayer rooms, washing facilities and separate halal options in the canteen. Participants all reported a visible increase of BAME representation within the force in recent years, which reflects a force wide increase from 5.08% in 2015 to 6.09% in 2020 (West Yorkshire Association of Muslim Police, 2020). However, responses repeatedly stressed that BAME representation in WYP is considerably lower than that within the general population.

Participants reiterated the impression that WYP diversification efforts are disproportionately targeted at recruiting BAME officers, with insufficient focus on retaining and promoting those already in the organisation. Participants suggested that failing to rectify the problems within the force itself were hindering the organisation's ability to improve its BAME numbers. A non-standardised exit interview process and lack of diversity training were specifically criticised.

Suggested points for consideration

Exploring suggestions to consider in future developments, most participants said more needed to be done to improve BAME representation in WYP, although empathetic phrases like the force was "trying their best" were used. Participants were asked where they believed improvements could be made. Echoing previous discussion, recruitment efforts were generally perceived as operating well and so recommendations tended to focus on supporting the BAME officers already employed. Participants recommended enforcing greater accountability in procedures to dispel perceptions of professional standards unfairly targeting BAME individuals. Suggestions included thoroughly conducted and recorded exit interviews and grievances. Participants also highlighted the value in placing BAME officers in higher ranks, not only promoting those individuals but providing others with role models.

In light of WYP's Chief recent announcement (Beever, 2020), discussion organically turned to the idea of positive discrimination. Some responses discussed the "controversial" and potentially "dangerous" nature of the measure, warning that its enforcement could encourage forces to recruit on ethnicity rather than merit.

Several participants stated that deciding whether to impose positive discrimination depended on a choice between improving BAME representation or avoiding the stigma that comes with it. However, multiple responses said that ethnic minority officers already receive comments like “you’re only getting this because you’re BAME” and so argued that positive discrimination should not be ruled out on this basis. The essence of responses here was the need for WYP to sustain a thorough commitment to the agenda, consistently placing it at the forefront of future endeavours. An awareness of the difficulty in doing this was apparent, with many participants sharing concerns about the longevity of priorities and the tendency for agendas to fall out of trend.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study corroborated prior research. Participants displayed great awareness of the need for diversity and inclusion in policing as well as the barriers encountered throughout the careers of BAME officers. Although responses revealed that a commitment to improving diversity in WYP was apparent, it was indicated that efforts tend to overly prioritise recruiting BAME officers at the expense of focusing on their retention and progression. Suggested points for consideration therefore stressed the need for greater support of BAME officers. Above all, this study sought to highlight the value in providing space for BAME individuals with frontline experience to share their thoughts and inform future developments.

METHODOLOGY

The research in this study was collected through a detailed literature review and semi-structured interviews. The sample consisted of six BAME staff, constables and senior officers. One non-BAME officer was also interviewed to include an outside perspective. This project’s generalisability is limited in two respects: it was a small-scale study and its topic was rooted in unique experiences. Government restrictions in place at the time also meant that all correspondence was remote and so the interviews were held online via video or audio call. Despite the practical constraints, the purpose of the study was achieved in the sense that officer and staff perspectives were explored, and its modest scale enabled rich insights to be secured.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A key takeaway from this study is the value in providing a platform for minority groups to share their thoughts and experiences, particularly for the individuals with frontline exposure. It is important that scholarship remembers that ‘being there is not the same as being heard’ (McLeod and Herrington, 2017, 182). As an ever-evolving field, research must continue to explore BAME representation in policing in general. However, the severe underrepresentation and literacy deficit regarding BAME female officers creates a specific and imperative focus for future research. Furthermore, the government’s ‘officer uplift’ scheme provides a fruitful opportunity to improve BAME numbers but, still in its early days, it is impossible to gauge whether its implementation will be used to increase police diversity. Therefore, there is scope for future research to explore its success over the next three years, particularly with respect to recruiting ethnic minority officers and rectifying the lack of BAME representation.

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